



Department of Children and Families' Needs Assessment: Interim Report

A Report by the Office of Performance Management and Accountability

Allison Blake, Ph.D., L.S.W.
Commissioner

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Executive Summary

Overview of project. This report presents the preliminary findings from the first stage of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families' 3-year Needs Assessment process focused on identifying the strengths and needs of children and youth at risk of entering out of home placement and those already in out of home placement through the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P). The focus of the first stage of the Needs Assessment process included the following elements:

1. Review of existing assessments of practice and needs assessments completed by DCF from 2010-2014 in order to inform the focus of the Needs Assessment;
2. Identify sources of secondary data for inclusion in the Needs Assessment; and
3. Form an internal workgroup.

Brief summary of activities. The key activities and accomplishments of the first phase of the Needs Assessment are summarized below.

Review of DCF Reports and Assessments. Key findings related to the review of existing reports and previous needs assessments are described here. Findings from each of these materials under review are discussed in greater detail in the report. Evaluative reports and assessments completed by DCF from 2008-2014 were subjected to a content analysis to identify common elements of child and family need encountered across the service domains of DCF. Interviews with stakeholders, case file reviews, and secondary data included in the review of reports and assessments converged around the finding that **community adversity is a major impediment to achieving permanency and a major factor in determining if a family will become involved with the child welfare system.** Specifically, families were reported as having difficulty with acquiring safe, stable housing; accessing consistent, affordable transportation; locating employment and vocational opportunities; and affording food. Additionally, the availability of social services was listed as a need for families, including mental health care, substance abuse treatment and child care. Other major themes highlighted in the materials focused on the need for stronger engagement and teaming with families and identification of the broader array of available supports; greater communication regarding policy and practice changes with resource parents, as well as training and support for parenting challenging youth and more comprehensive transition planning for all older youth.

Identification of Existing Data Sources. Existing sources of data were identified to begin the process of defining the needs that families have when they present to DCF and New Jersey's service array for vulnerable children and families. These data sources include:

1. New Jersey's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (NJ SPIRIT);
2. Children's System of Care (CSOC) behavioral health care data;
3. Division of Family and Community Partnerships' Community Program Directory;
4. DCF County Needs Assessment Service Inventories;
5. NJ Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' Directory of Mental Health Services;
6. DMHAS Addiction Services Treatment Directory; and
7. United States Census.

The United States Census' American Community Survey was used to establish the geographic distribution of the major socioeconomic and community risk factors identified in the review of existing DCF reports and assessments. This information will be paired with data from NJ SPIRIT and the service array to identify gaps and/or overlaps in the services that address the needs of children and families.

Formation of Internal and External Workgroups. The Internal and External Workgroups will provide critical guidance as the Needs Assessment process goes forward. The Internal Workgroup met in early December 2014 to detail the mission of the group and establish a meeting schedule for 2015.

A sub-group of the Internal Workgroup has been meeting weekly since August 2014 to guide the initial NJ SPIRIT data extract to be used in the Needs Assessment and identify the sources of existing data discussed above. This group will continue to meet weekly as the Needs Assessment unfolds and is responsible for carrying out the tasks necessary to produce analysis and deliverables for the project.

Lastly, the External Workgroup will meet in January 2015 and is comprised of individuals from around New Jersey, including representatives from community-based agencies, the court system, families, youth, and other key stakeholders. These individuals will provide feedback on needs and service priorities. DCF has begun to solicit participation from stakeholders and the Internal Workgroup will monitor and facilitate the formation of the External Workgroup.

Next Steps. The first phase of the Needs Assessment has provided a structure to the process going forward and identified the specific steps:

1. Continue monthly Internal Workgroup meetings;
2. Begin External Workgroup meetings;
3. Analyze NJ SPIRIT data to identify child and family needs at a state level;
4. Conduct subgroup analysis of needs for:
 - a. Frequently Encountered Families (3 or more referrals in 1 year)
 - b. Age group cohorts
 - c. Out of Home Care placement
 - d. In-home service population
 - e. Re-entry to Out of Home Care
 - f. Children with long duration in Out of Home Care;
5. Finalize service array dataset; and
6. Use state and county data to tailor the Needs Assessment focus in Region 1.

Introduction and Report Organization

Introduction

The NJ Department of Children and Families (DCF) has implemented a multi-year Needs Assessment that seeks to identify the strengths and needs of children and families who are involved with or at-risk of being involved in child welfare services. As part of the ongoing requirements under the Modified Settlement Agreement (MSA) and commitment to operating as a learning organization, DCF is taking concrete steps to better understand the needs and service gaps for those it serves. Findings from evaluative activities conducted by DCF and its partners from 2008-2014 on a range of case practice issues and subpopulations are leveraged here to guide the focus and data gathering process in this first phase of the Needs Assessment.

Report Organization

This report details the activities of the first phase of the DCF Needs Assessment in the following sections:

Section I: Review of DCF Reports and Assessments: 2008-2014: Content analysis of existing reports and assessments to identify common needs.

Section II: Identification of Existing Data Sources: Identification of existing data sources to both define needs at the individual, family, and community levels and establish the current service array for children and families.

Section III: United States Census Indicators: Preliminary analysis of socioeconomic indicators identified in Section I.

Section IV: Formation of Internal and External Workgroups: Description of the DCF Internal Workgroup tasked with the planning, implementation, recommendations, and follow-up necessary for the success of the Needs Assessment project.

Section V: Next Steps: Identification of the next steps for the DCF Needs Assessment process.

Section I: Review of DCF Reports and Assessments: 2008-2014

Introduction

DCF has completed a series of reports and assessments aimed at identifying strengths and needs in all aspects of the agency’s practice with children, youth and families in New Jersey. As a first step in the Needs Assessment process, these reports were reviewed to identify common elements of need that are encountered across the various practice areas of DCF.

Method

Table 1 lists the reports reviewed for this analysis. Broadly speaking, the reports detail assessments of: 1) Case practice, and 2) Stakeholder perspectives on the needs of families and communities related to involvement with DCF. These reports were subjected to a content analysis where need was the major sensitizing concept across reports. Findings from the assessments in Table 1 are presented according to identified needs for case practice and family and community need.

Table 1. DCF Reports Analyzed for Needs Assessment

Report Title	Focus
Qualitative Review 2013 Annual Report	Case Practice
Resource Parent Perspectives, August 2014	Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention
Comprehensive Needs Assessment of DCF-Involved Youth Project: Volume 1 - Overview of Project & Comprehensive Summary of Youths’ Experience with DCF	Case Practice with Youth Aged 18-21
Comprehensive Needs Assessment of DCF-Involved Youth Project: Volume 2 - Understanding Youths’ Housing, Employment, and Education Needs and Accomplishments	Case Practice with Youth Aged 18-21
Comprehensive Needs Assessment of DCF-Involved Youth Project: Volume 3 - Exploring Youths’ Physical & Mental Health Functioning	Case Practice with Youth Aged 18-21
Comprehensive Needs Assessment of DCF-Involved Youth Project: Volume 4 - Exploring Youths’ Interpersonal Relationships, Mentoring & Social Support, and Sexuality	Case Practice with Youth Aged 18-21
Measuring Services Youth are Receiving through the New Jersey Qualitative Review (Measure 54) July 2014	Case Practice with Youth Aged 18-21
A Review of Housing, Employment, and Education Status for Older Youth Exiting Care in New Jersey: Findings and Recommendations (Measure 55) July 2014	Case Practice with Youth Aged 18-21; Permanency & Independent Living for Youth Exiting DCF
New Jersey Child Protective Services Investigative Practice 2013 Assessment	CPS Case Practice
The New Jersey State Central Registry (SCR) 2011 Assessment	Quality and Effectiveness of the SCR
Supporting Strong Families and Communities in New Jersey: Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect, 2014-2017	Prevention of Child Maltreatment
County Needs Assessments	Identification and Prioritization of County-level Needs

Overview of Case Practice Assessments

Qualitative Review. The Qualitative Review (QR) process is used to assess the overall performance of the child welfare system by evaluating outcomes for individual children and families through an examination of case records and interviews with children, caregivers/parents and supports or service providers. In 2013, DCF conducted the QR process through 1,811 interviews that were connected to 192 children or youth. This process identified areas of strength and Areas in Need of Improvement (ANI). While DCF exhibited overall strength in child and family status indicators (*i.e.*, safety, stability, physical/emotional well-being), the critical ANI included facilitating progress towards permanency, engagement with families and family teamwork formation and functioning.

Achieving permanency is the ultimate goal for children and families served by DCF. Barriers to permanency indicated in the QR process were the Engagement and Teamwork elements of case practice and delays in the court system. Focused efforts are needed to address parental feedback regarding not having input in the case planning process. Results also indicated that the formation of teams was limited by inadequate collaboration with a wide array of formal and informal supports, resulting in parents feeling unaware of the range of formal and informal supports for case planning activities. Another ANI was related to Assessment and Understanding, as the QR indicated that the underlying needs of parents were not well understood, meaning many missed opportunities for crafting individualized case plans.

State Central Registry. The State Central Registry (SCR) is New Jersey's primary entry point to the public child protection system and functions to receive, prioritize and dispatch responses to suspected child maltreatment and assessments for child welfare services. In 2011, DCF evaluated the effectiveness of the SCR system along the following criteria: information gathering, documentation, SCR screener professionalism, and intake decision-making. Strengths of the SCR included: appropriate and thorough information collection and documentation; SCR screeners' competency and professionalism during calls; and the decision-making process related to response times and the appropriate coding of call types.

The ANI identified in the SCR assessment included a clarification of policy and definitions of the following call types: Information and Referral, Information Only, and No Action Required. While the overall information gathering of SCR screeners was a strength, reinforcing the importance of collecting information about the family home environment, especially around primary language spoken, mental health and substance abuse issues, would ensure the collection of critical information to inform the appropriate call coding and assist the field worker in appropriately responding. Lastly, it was noted that SCR supervision could improve through the use of recorded calls where supervisors can directly assess the performance of SCR screeners.

Child Protective Services Investigative Practices. DCF conducted an assessment of the overall quality of Child Protective Services' (CPS) investigative case practice in 2013 through a case record review of a sample of completed CPS investigations. Overall strengths of CPS case practice included agreement with the case finding, timeliness of the response, completion of Safety and Risk Assessments, provision of services to prevent foster care entry, pre-investigation case conferences, teamed responses in potentially unsafe situations, interviews with mothers, completion of caregiver strengths and needs assessments and the notification of case decision to families.

The ANI identified in the CPS assessment included conducting interviews with fathers, completion of Child Strengths and Needs Assessments, collection of collateral information during the CPS investigation,

interviewing children alone, completion of CPS investigation within 60 days and conducting post-investigative case conferences.

Resource Parent Perspectives. An assessment of resource parent experiences associated with attrition from the system was conducted in 2014. Participants indicated that pre-service training could detail the level of DCF support resource parents should expect and provide skills-building regarding how to work with children with behavioral or emotional issues. Greater availability of childcare and respite care was needed to support working resource parents. Related to support, resource parents also felt communication with DCF could be improved to ensure they receive information about child placements, policy changes and caseworker turnover.

Case Practice with Older Youth. DCF has conducted a series of assessments in 2014 aimed at improving service delivery and outcomes for older youth in foster care and those who are transitioning to adulthood. A number of strengths were observed in interviews with youth aged 18-21 including safety, stability in home and vocational/educational settings, physical and emotional health and availability of support services.

The ANI identified through the assessments deal primarily with the functions of case planning practice: continuing to update case plans and assess needs of youth transitioning out of care. Specifically, the use of Transition Plans and a strengthening of the teaming process for older youth were highlighted as critical for ensuring successful transition. Additionally, in terms of preparing youth for independent living, the completion of independent living assessments, case closing agreements and provision of educational and vocational supports were identified as needs to ensure success. Lastly, the facilitation of long-term supportive relationships with adults was identified as a goal of case practice with older youth.

Overview of Assessments of Family and Community Need

Qualitative Review. In the QR process, family resourcefulness – a family’s ability to identify their own needs and secure the resources needed to meet those needs - was identified as an ANI. This is a critical component of a family’s ability to function separately from DCF. In cases where resourcefulness was noted as an ANI, there was a lack of financial support, employment, transportation and safe housing resources available to the family.

Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect. The New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect engaged DCF leadership, service providers, community advocates and parents to develop a strategic guide for preventing child abuse and neglect. Stakeholders identified a range of programs in New Jersey that were considered strengths for the prevention of child maltreatment, including: Evidence-based home visiting, Family Success Centers, domestic violence services, school-based youth services, the *Enough Abuse* campaign, and child assault prevention services. The Parents Anonymous model was also experienced as an evidenced based model with opportunity to further explore. Additionally, service providers and parents reported that they were most familiar with the following programs: County Welfare Agencies, Head Start/Early Start and NJ 211.

Stakeholders reported that communities and families facing adversity would benefit from more support. Systemic barriers, poverty and disability often negatively impact a family’s ability to access needed physical and behavioral health care, affordable housing, employment and educational opportunities.

Effective prevention efforts would necessitate an expansion of evidence-based programming in the state and the development of programs that address specific risk factors for child abuse and neglect, including child disability and parental substance abuse. Lastly, stakeholders reported that the ability to raise awareness of prevention efforts is crucial to reach the families most in need of these services.

County Needs Assessments. Starting in 2008, County Departments of Human Services and their Human Services Advisory Councils (HSAC) conducted needs assessments of at-risk children and families. Most counties engaged with stakeholders (parents, youth and service providers) to complete an online survey and participate in a series of focus groups to identify the issues facing families and the services available to meet those needs. Counties were asked to identify needs in the following categories: Basic Needs, Substance Abuse Treatment, Mental Health Services, Transitional Living Services and Domestic Violence Services. In addition, counties were free to explore other issues that were important at the local level.

In the Basic Needs category, needs consistently included safe, affordable housing, transportation, basic health care and affordable childcare. In the areas of Substance Abuse and Mental Health treatment, wider accessibility of services (some counties had no inpatient or outpatient providers), reduction of waiting lists, bilingual services, services for co-occurring disorders and general capacity issues of providers were noted as needs. The Transitional Services needed were consistently affordable housing and educational/vocational services. In the area of Domestic Violence Services, there was a consistent need for shelters, transitional/permanent housing and transportation. Some counties identified the need for programs that address trauma for the child victims, prevention programs and clinical treatment for both the adult victim and the perpetrator. Several counties identified local needs that were outside of the five categories mentioned above, including: services for youth with developmental disabilities, helping youth transition from child systems of mental health and substance abuse to their adult counterparts, services for pregnant and parenting individuals dealing with severe mental illness and improving services for undocumented children and families.

Concluding Remarks on Review of Reports

This review of assessments and reports conducted by DCF with its partners is helpful in framing the current statewide Needs Assessment. From the review of assessments dealing with case practice functions, assessment and reassessment of need, case planning and engagement with children and families were common needs identified. The reports and assessments presenting information on the needs of children and families at-risk of DCF involvement presented a common set of factors related to adversity at the community level. Stakeholders from every county included in the review indicated families have difficulty acquiring safe, stable housing; accessing consistent, affordable transportation; and locating employment and vocational opportunities. Other identified issues included food security and availability of childcare. These hardships were connected to three types of barriers: 1) structural issues associated with community adversity; 2) individual disability; and 3) language and citizenship status. In addition, issues like affordable housing and transportation cut across the different areas of practice with children and families and program availability was challenged in the areas of substance abuse, mental health, independent living and domestic violence services. Lastly, the availability of services was mentioned by every county as a need. Across the state, substance abuse and mental health treatment were perceived as being inaccessible in terms of geographic scarcity and long waiting lists for services.

This review of the evaluative reports conducted by DCF from 2008-2014 informs the current Needs Assessment by providing important insights gathered from key stakeholders around the state. These findings can be used to identify data variables of interest in various community sources and the NJ SPIRIT system. Housing has been mentioned in numerous places as a need, so including census measures related to housing (*i.e.*, residential migration, median home values, vacant housing) is supported as well. In the Appendix of this report, census measures that reflect community issues are presented to give an indication of the geographic distribution of poverty, unemployment, food security and housing affordability in New Jersey.

Section II: Identification of Data Sources

Another aspect of this first phase of the Needs Assessment process was the identification of quantitative data that could be utilized to identify the needs of children and families in New Jersey as well as the existing service array meant to serve those needs. First, New Jersey's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), NJ SPIRIT, was identified as the major source of information for the identification of family need. NJ SPIRIT will provide information on the volume of Child Protective Services reports, Child Welfare Services referrals, identification of family strengths and needs through analysis of assessments and structured decision-making tools. Additionally, data from DCF's CSOC will be used to identify the range of behavioral health care and developmental disability services children and adolescents receive in partnership with DCF.

In terms of defining the service array in New Jersey, four data sources will be combined to provide an indication of the presence and accessibility of services. The sources of data include the following:

1. Division of Family and Community Partnerships' (FCP) Community Program Directory: The FCP directory includes only services/programs directly funded by DCF.
2. County Needs Assessment Service Inventories: As part of the county needs assessment process, Human Service Advisory Councils were asked to develop service inventories to detail all social services available to children and families in their respective counties.
3. NJ Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services' (DMHAS) Directory of Mental Health Services: This directory includes information on mental health programs in NJ that receive any funding from DMHAS.
4. DMHAS Addiction Services Treatment Directory: This directory includes information on programs for alcohol and drug abuse treatment in New Jersey for adolescents and adults.

These directories will be cross-referenced to remove duplication. Additionally, services will be categorized according to the following: Family Support Services, Domestic Violence Services, Early Childhood Services, School-Linked Services, Mental Health Services and Substance Abuse Services. The final inventory of service programs in NJ will be used to establish the current service array and compare the availability of the various service domains with child and family need identified in the NJ SPIRIT assessments.

Lastly, United States Census data will be used to provide data on the number of children in order to calculate rates of CPS/CWS involvement, out of home care entry, re-reports to CPS and re-entry to out of home care. Demographic and socioeconomic data representing the structural conditions identified

by stakeholders in the existing reports and assessments will be utilized to corroborate the qualitative assessments of community need.

Section III: United States Census Indicators

The review of DCF assessments identified several community factors stakeholders cite as being important issues for children and families at-risk of being referred to CPS/CWS, entering out of home care and/or re-entering out of home care. These included poverty, affordable housing and food security. Stakeholders also indicated that a need exists for bi-lingual service providers as the Spanish-speaking population grows in New Jersey. Using data from the 2010 and 2012 US Census' American Community Survey, indicators measured at the census tract level¹ were mapped to demonstrate the geographic distribution in 2012 of the socioeconomic measures identified as being important for families who interface with DCF. Additionally, data from 2010 and 2012 were used to calculate the percent change in the indicators from 2010-2012. The following census indicators were used:

- Poverty: Percentage of families with children that have income below the federal poverty line.
- Poverty: Percentage of residents that are unemployed.
- Housing: Households with gross rent equal or greater than 35% of total income (GRAPI).
- Food Security: Percentage of households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- Language Barriers: Percentage of households that primarily speak Spanish.

In the Appendix, Figures 1-5 illustrate the geographic distribution of the above indicators. With the exception of percentage of households with children that had income below the poverty line, the community indicators showed increases from 2010-2012. The largest increase² was seen for those who receive SNAP benefits with a 13% increase, followed by GRAPI at 1.8% and unemployment at .11%. Additionally, there was a 1.8% increase in the percentage of households where Spanish is the primary language spoken. As data from NJ SPIRIT are integrated, the Needs Assessment will be able to explore the relationship between the needs indicated as part of a family's DCF case record and their distribution in the general population.

Additionally, the DCF-sponsored report completed by the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect, *Supporting Strong Families and Communities in New Jersey: Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect, 2014-2017* highlighted a municipal-level Home Visiting Risk Index, generated by a partnership between DCF and Department of Health, used to prioritize resources for early childhood services based on the geographic distribution of concentrated risk factors. In the Appendix, Figure 6 combines the following census, crime, health and child welfare indicators to create an overall risk index: rates of poverty, unemployment, crime, high school drop-out, domestic violence arrest, child abuse and neglect, births, infant mortality, low birth weights (less than 2,500 grams) and pre-term births (less than 37 weeks). Figure 6 illustrates the municipalities in NJ where risk is concentrated and indicates a clear pattern of high risk pooled in the southern part of the state.

¹ Census tracts are small, relatively homogenous geographic entities with population between 1,000 and 8,000 people.

² The change percentages represented are the median value for all census tracts in NJ. These data are highly skewed, so mean change is not a reliable indicator of change. However, the mean values were as follows: Poverty=8.9%; SNAP=30.3%; GRAPI=6.1%; Unemployment=.18% and Primary Language Spanish=12.3%.

Section IV: Formation of Internal and External Workgroup

As part of the Needs Assessment process, DCF formed an Internal Workgroup tasked with the planning for and the identification of child and family needs as well as the prioritization of any identified service enhancements. The Internal Workgroup is headed by the Assistant Commissioner of Performance Management and Accountability (PMA) and includes additional staff from DCF to include representation from the Office of Strategic Development, the Office of Quality, the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Reporting (RER) and the Office of Contracting. Additionally, staff in key roles across the Division of Child Protection & Permanency, Children's System of Care (CSOC), Office of Adolescent Services (OAS), Clinical Services and Family and Community Partnerships (FCP) are participating in the Internal Workgroup.

The Internal Workgroup met in early December 2014 to outline the process going forward. This group will meet monthly to review the progress of the Needs Assessment, provide critical guidance and identify need and service priorities.

A sub-group of the Internal Workgroup has been meeting weekly since August 2014 to guide the initial NJ SPIRIT data extract to be used in the Needs Assessment and identify the sources of existing data discussed above. This group will continue to meet weekly as the Needs Assessment unfolds and is responsible for carrying out the tasks necessary to produce analysis and deliverables for the project.

Lastly, the process began for the creation of an External Workgroup comprised of individuals from around New Jersey, including representatives from community based agencies, the court system, families, youth and other key stakeholders. DCF has begun to solicit participation from these sectors and the first meeting is planned for late January 2015. The Internal Workgroup will monitor and facilitate the formation of the External Workgroup.

Section V: Next Steps

Over the next quarter, the Internal Workgroup will continue to guide the development of the DCF Needs Assessment and convene the External Workgroup to act as the outside advisory council. Data from NJ SPIRIT will be analyzed to both describe the constellation of strengths and needs that families have when they present to DCF and investigate how these strengths and needs contribute to proximal outcomes in the child welfare system (*i.e.*, entry to out of home care). Additionally, data on the service array in New Jersey will be used to investigate where gaps or overlaps in service availability exist around the state and how the local array of services is connected to child welfare system involvement. Results from the state and county analysis will inform the focus as the Needs Assessment moves to Region 1, which is the northern part of the state and includes the following counties: Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Middlesex, Morris, Passaic, Sussex and Union. The Internal and External Workgroups will aid in prioritizing the needs and services that are germane to the counties located in northern New Jersey.

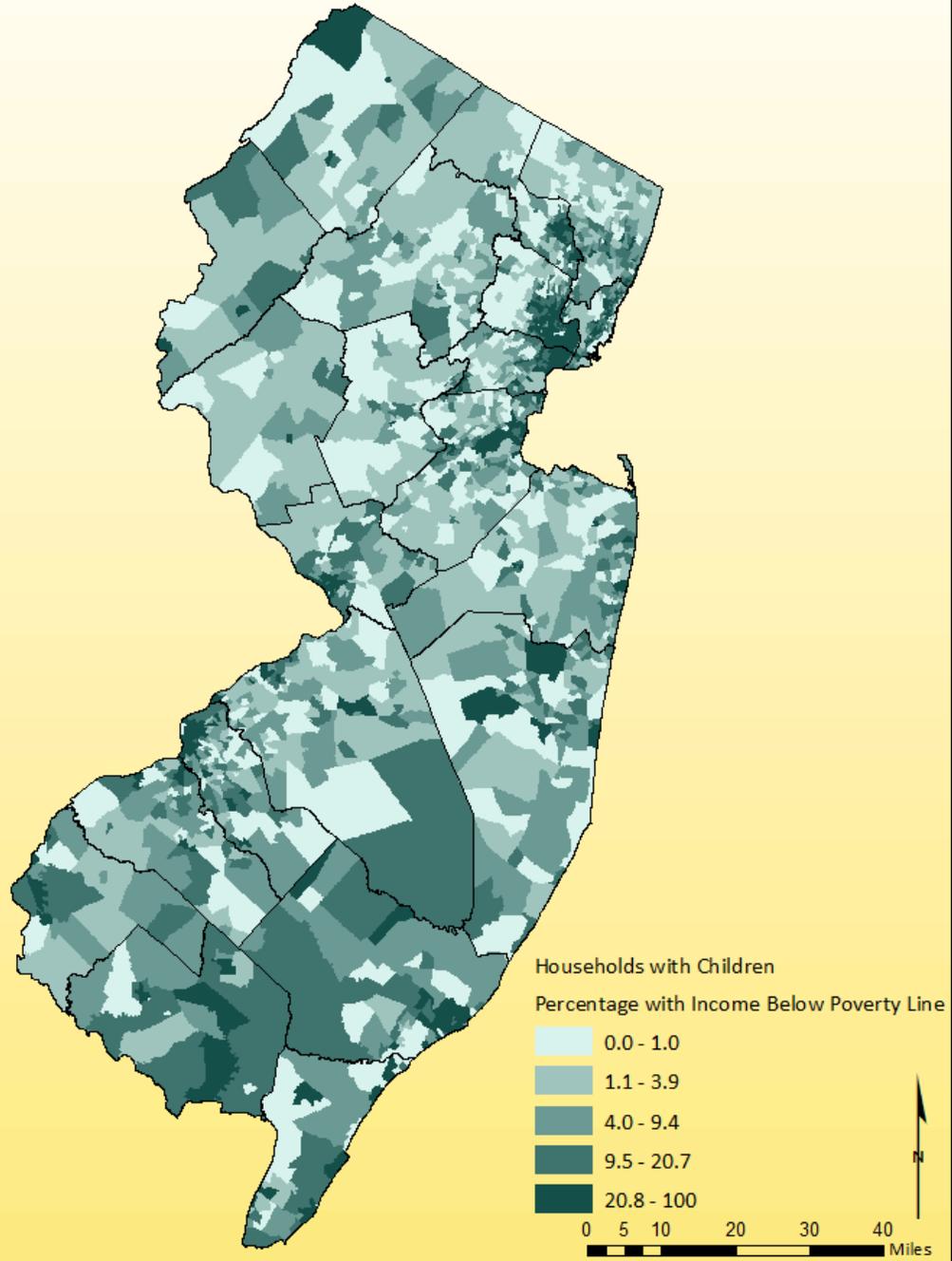
Specifically, the next steps in the Needs Assessment will include:

1. Continue monthly Internal Workgroup meetings;
2. Begin External Workgroup meetings;
3. Analyze NJ SPIRIT data to identify child and family needs at a state and county level;
4. Subgroup analysis of needs for:

- a. Frequently Encountered Families (3 or more referrals in 1 year)
 - b. Age group cohorts
 - c. Out of Home Care placement
 - d. In home service population
 - e. Re-entry to Out of Home Care
 - f. Children with long duration in Out of Home Care;
5. Finalize service array dataset; and
 6. Use state and county data to tailor the Needs Assessment focus in Region 1.

Appendix: Maps of Community Indicators

New Jersey 2012 Households with Children Percentage with Income Below Poverty Line



Source: US Census American Community Survey, 2012

Figure 1

New Jersey 2012 Percentage of Unemployed Adults in Labor Force

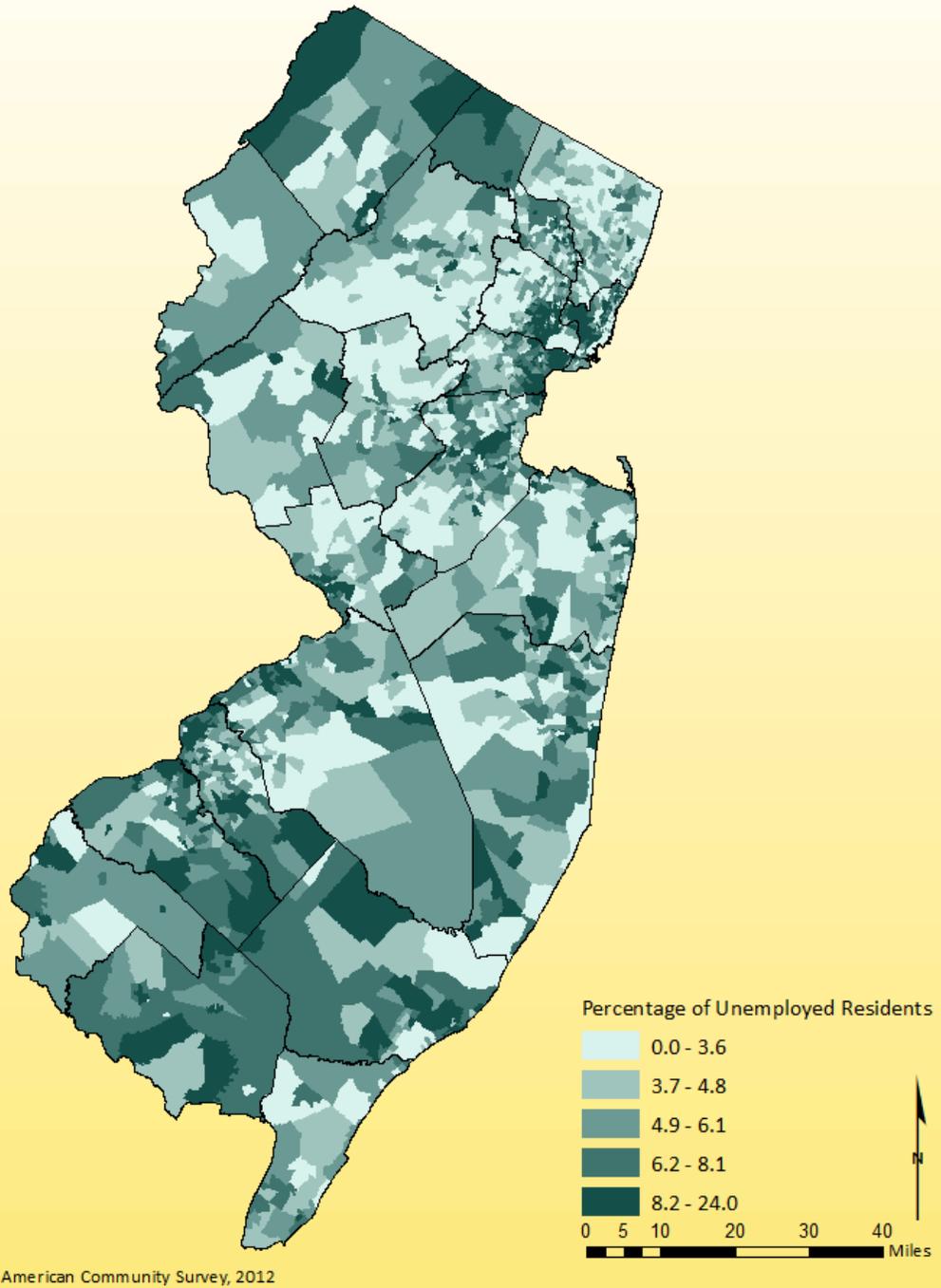
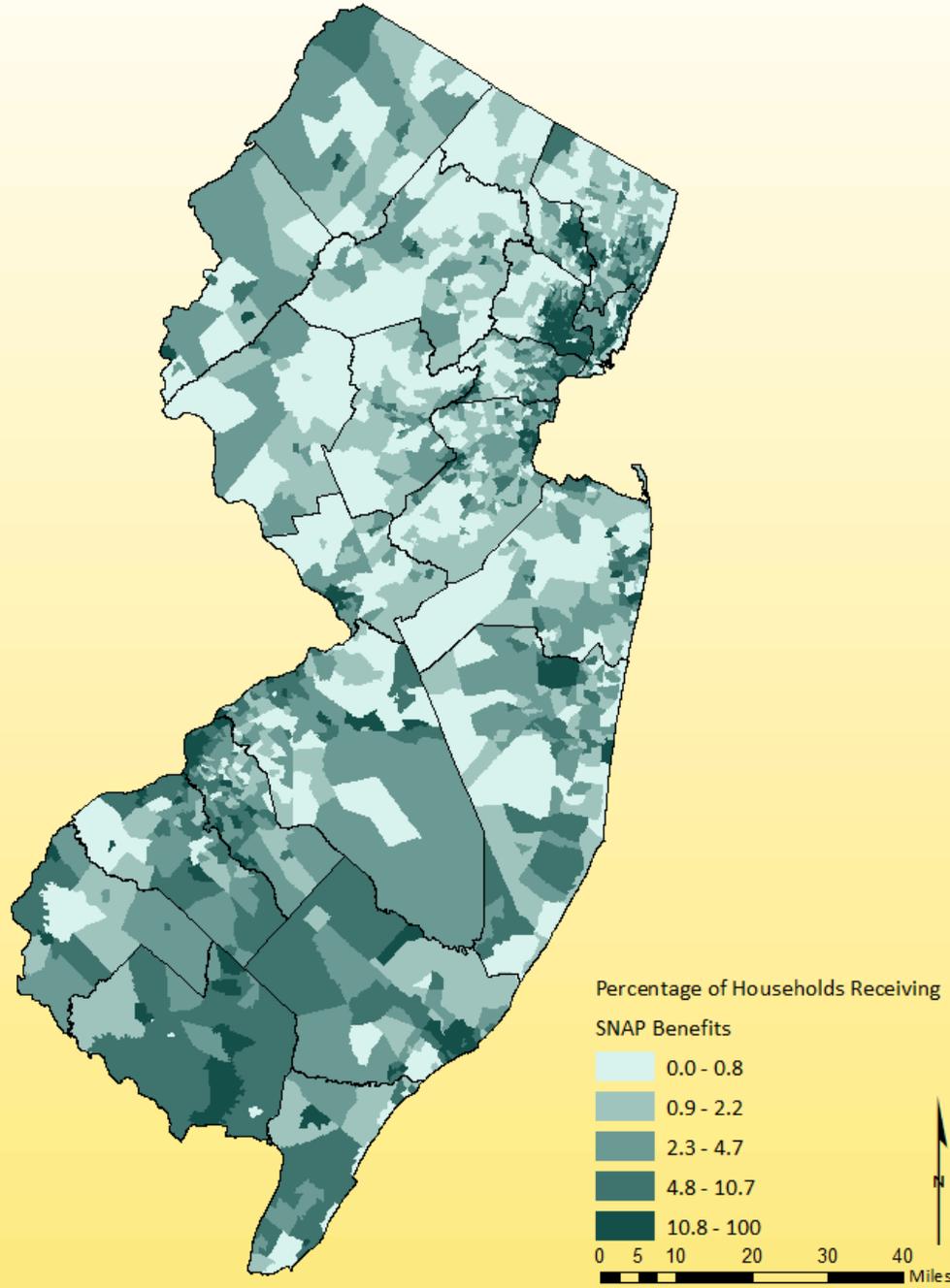


Figure 2

New Jersey 2012 Percentage of Households Receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits



Source: US Census American Community Survey, 2012

Figure 3

New Jersey 2012 Percentage of Households with Gross Rent Higher than 35% of Total Income



Source: US Census American Community Survey, 2012

Figure 4

New Jersey 2012 Percentage of Households with Spanish as the Primary Language

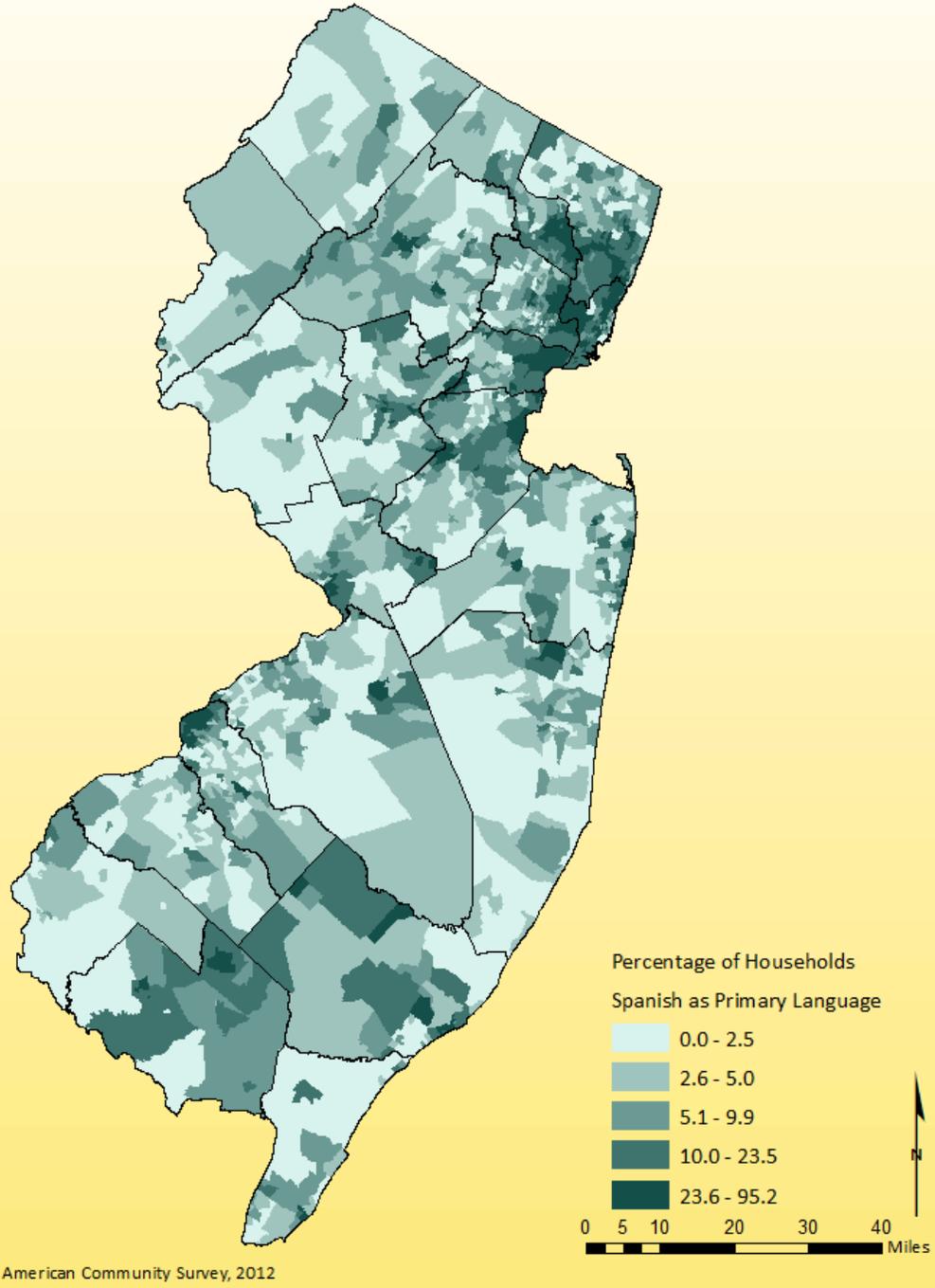


Figure 5

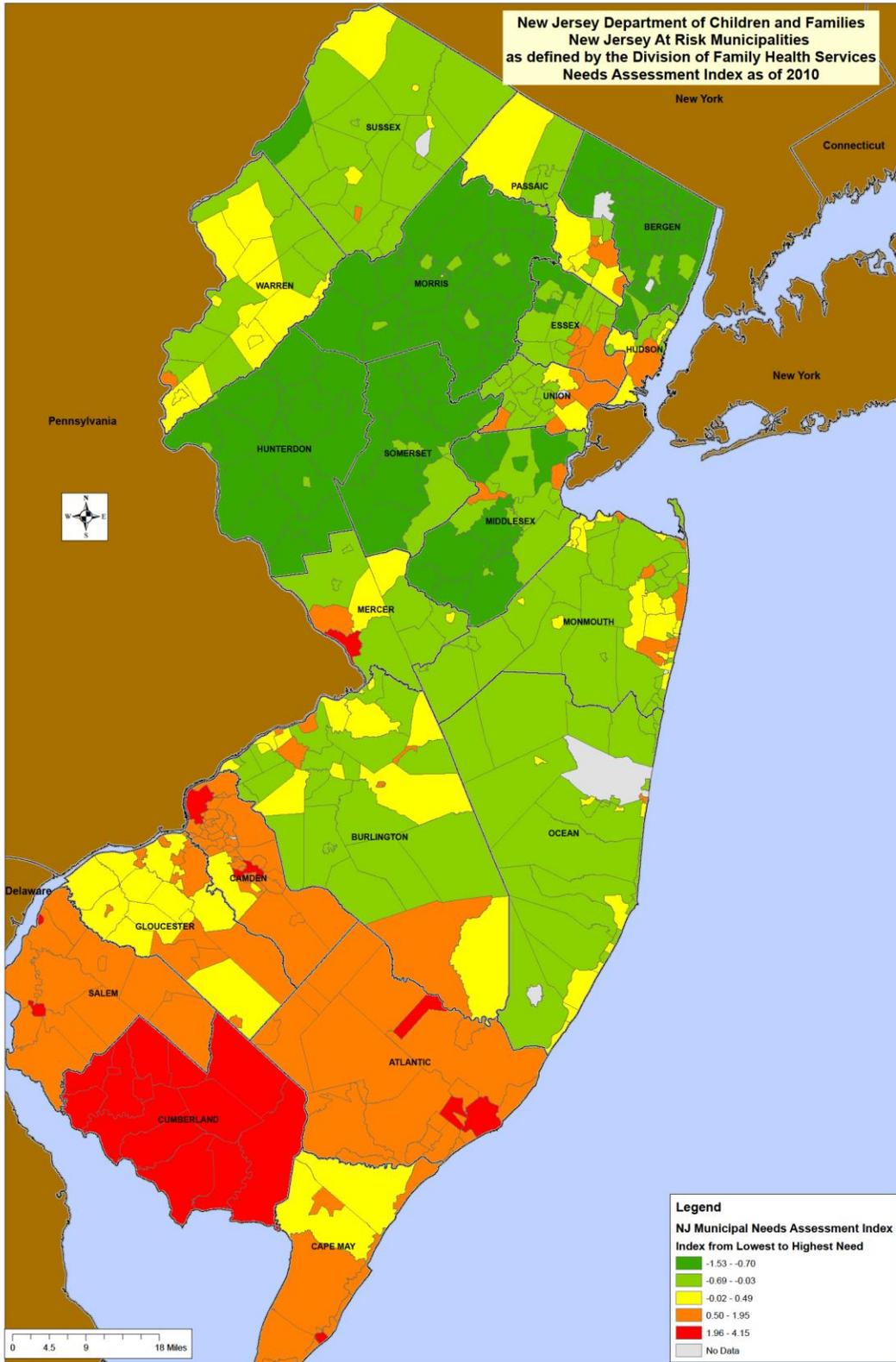


Figure 6